UCLA Drasnin
DR200589

KJ Opinion Page

Fri., Jan. 23, 1976

Good theater, bad journalism

Irving Drasnin must be a brave man. The producer of The Guns of Autumn is coming to Augusta on the 29th to look right down the gun barrel. He will defend the documentary as a true report and will undoubtedly hear it attacked (again) as an unqualified and unrelieved distortion of the hunter and his mystique.

If you didn't tune in on The Guns of Autumn last October you missed a rather remarkable presentation that bore down heavily on one kind of hunting. Some women chased the children to bed and turned the set off; some threw up. If you had always wanted to know how an ungulate dies when hit by a soft-nosed bullet but were afraid to ask, the show told you. Tongues loll, limbs twitch and thrash, the head rises more and more feebly, the great soft eyes glaze, and still the camera lingers lovingly, closely, unwaveringly. Much of the footage was taken in private game preserves where the only requirement for success is cash.

Writing in the Columbia Journalism Review this month, Drasnin says "It is true, the broadcast contains scenes of dead and dying wildlife, close-up and at a distance, or exactly as the hunter sees and experiences them. It is also true that the act of killing wildlife — or harvesting, or managing, or of consumptive use if you prefer — is what sets hunting apart from nature walks, bird-watching, and photographic safaris. . . . . On what journalistic grounds would such scenes be omitted from a report on hunting?"

Drasnin is a brave man but he isn't a very convincing one except when he says the truth or the accuracy of The Guns of Autumn are not in question. It is true that a stricken deer dies in much the way his stricken deer died, but to aver that the high proportion of death scenes in game preserves represented a true picture of hunters and hunting is simply untrue. It is as untrue as would be a documentary on marriage that focused on adultery and divorce. We suspect Mr. Drasnin had to consider good theater as much as good reporting. After all, if only one deer hunter in ten fills his tag the chances of the camera recording a kill under free range conditions would have been slight.

Such a propensity, opting for form over substance, for the excitingly false over the drably true, is a human failing rather than a journalistic one, but a failing to which journalists are especially prone by the very nature of our calling. To be selective in one's presentation of facts is judgmental, but it becomes a vital judgment when the facts selected distort the subject to the reader-viewer or mislead him in the conclusions he draws. Our quarrel with The Guns of Autumn is solely on such professional grounds.